

Arthur Ekirch on American Militarism

Ralph Raico

In 1783 the treaty ending hostilities between Great Britain and its rebellious colonies along the eastern seaboard of North America was signed in Paris. For their part the English proclaimed that, “His Britannic Majesty acknowledges the said United States, viz., New Hampshire, Massachusetts Bay, Rhode Island and Providence Plantations ...” – there followed the rest of the thirteen colonies – “to be free sovereign and independent states,” with the British Crown relinquishing all claims to “the same and every part thereof.”

Amazingly, a collection of artisans, merchants, and mostly farmers had defied one of the great military machines of Europe, and the greatest empire, and won. It was a triumph that gladdened the hearts of lovers of liberty and republican government the world over.

Today, this United States, now definitively in the singular, is itself the world's greatest military machine and sole imperial power. How did this happen? In *The Civilian and the Military: A History of the American Antimilitarist Tradition*,¹ Arthur A. Ekirch traces this portentous transformation to 1972 (counting his preface).

Murray Rothbard called Ekirch's work “brilliant,” and praised it as “an example of a revisionist outlook on all three great wars of the twentieth century.” Robert Higgs, in his foreword to the Independent Institute's edition of Ekirch's *The Decline of American Liberalism*, provides a summary of the life and productive academic career of Arthur Ekirch. He notes that Ekirch registered as a conscientious objector in the Second World War but was nonetheless sentenced to work without pay as a logger and later in a school for the mentally retarded, experiences that did not endear the American state to the feisty scholar.

Militarism can be defined as the permeation of civil society by military institutions, influences, and values.

As Ekirch sketches it, the Anglo-American heritage of explicit antimilitarism began to be formed in 17th-century England, especially with the Levellers and resistance to a standing army.

This tradition continued among the British settlers of what became the United States. It is evident in the attitudes of the leaders of the American Revolution. James Madison, for instance, stated:

Of all the enemies to public liberty war is, perhaps, the most to be dreaded, because it comprises and develops the germ of every other. War is the parent of armies; from these proceed debts and taxes; and armies, and debts, and taxes are the known instruments for bringing the many under the domination of the few.

The connection between antimilitarism and nonintervention in the affairs of foreign nations – what its crafty opponents have succeeded in labeling “isolationism” – was often marked among the rebellious colonials. Ekirch points out that “an important argument for independence had been that it would free the American people from involvement in the wars of Europe and from the necessity of helping to support a British army.” The radical republican position was put boldly by Jefferson: “I am for free commerce with all nations; political connection with none; and little or no diplomatic establishment.”

But during their presidencies, Jefferson and especially Madison reneged on their noninterventionist and antiwar position. The war hawks in their party clamored for confrontation with England, hoping to acquire Canada. Though this proved impossible, Madison's War of 1812 was considered a success. A military spirit was awakened, shown in the popular adulation of war heroes and military displays at Fourth of July parades.

As war with Mexico drew near, Daniel Webster criticized the maneuvers of President James Polk. His words were to be the key to America's future wars, from the provisioning of Fort Sumter on: "What is the value of this constitutional provision [granting Congress the sole power to declare war] if the President on his own authority may make such military movements as must bring on war?" Easy victory over Mexico, however, further fueled the military spirit.

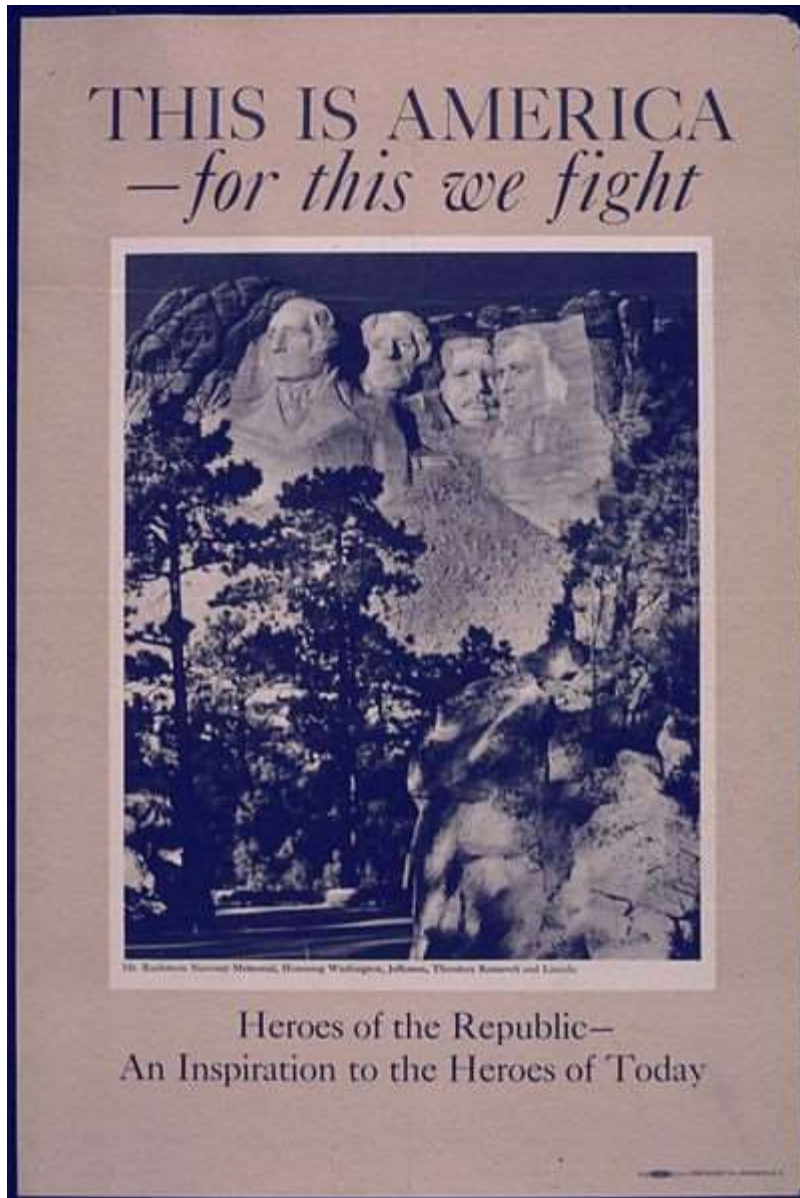
If the Jeffersonians can be accused of surrendering their principles, what are we to say of some of the celebrated antistatists of the 19th and early 20th centuries? Henry David Thoreau, whose conscience rebelled at the US war against Mexico, became an enthusiast for the "just war" against the slave states. He revered John Brown, referring to him as a Christ upon the cross when Brown tried to raise a servile rebellion among the millions of slaves of the South, a move "credited" with helping start the Civil War. That awful bloodletting cost 620,000 lives.

Charles Sumner, famous classical liberal and free trader, wrote in his 1845 work, *The True Grandeur of Nations*, "Can there be in our age any peace that is not honorable, any war that is not dishonorable?" But he also found an honorable war in the attack on the South.

Later, Benjamin Tucker, individualist anarchist, was a cheerleader for the Entente's war with Germany. For his part, the anarchist Peter Kropotkin urged Russia on to war with the Central Powers in 1914. Poor Kropotkin was bewildered by the way it turned out, a Bolshevik tyranny worse than anything ever experienced before. The war itself cost many millions of lives, the worst bloodbath in European history to that time.

The point is that these individualists were no Bastiats or Herbert Spencers. None could resist the pull of a *just* war. None understood the insight of Randolph Bourne – whom Ekirch calls one of the few who "stood firm" against the first crusade against Germany – that "war is the health of the state."

During the Civil War the United States "was placed under what, for all practical purposes, amounted to a military dictatorship." Lincoln suspended the writ of habeas corpus, shut down newspapers critical of his policies, and held thousands as political prisoners. His conscription law led to draft riots, particularly in New York City, but a precedent had been set.



“This is America - for this we fight” uses a photo of Mt. Rushmore for propaganda purposes. By the Office for Emergency Management, Office of War Information, Domestic Operations Branch, Bureau of Special Services (03/09/1943 - 09/15/1945). (U.S. National Archives and Records Administration) [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

Union veterans formed the Grand Army of the Republic, demanding pensions and preference in government jobs. The US Army continued to justify its jobs by its taxpayer-funded backing of the railroad barons in the West and the campaigns to exterminate the Plains Indians. Military training and “education” proliferated in schools and colleges.

In the 1880s and '90s, navalism surged ahead, with industries, steel above all, promoting their own vested interests. The tradition of a navy solely for the coastal defense of the country – as old as the republic – was abandoned.

There were critics of the new militarism, E.L. Godkin of *The Nation* and William Graham Sumner, whose essay, *The Conquest of the United States by Spain* (1898), against the war on the Philippines has inspired anti-imperialists ever since. (His great essay is now [available online](#).)

But the few critics could not prevail against the powerful cabal of Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan, Henry Cabot Lodge, and Theodore Roosevelt, which represented a turning point on the road to empire.

Mahan was not much of a naval commander (his ships tended to collide), but he was a superb propagandist for navalism. His work on *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783* was seized upon by navalists in Germany, Japan, France, and elsewhere. It fueled the arms race that led to the First World War, proving to be no great blessing to mankind.

In the Senate, Lodge pushed for war with Spain and the takeover of the Philippines, later for war with Germany, and following that war, for a vindictive peace treaty that would keep the Germans down for the foreseeable future. Throughout, Lodge pressed for a navy second to none, demanded by America's new empire. The Navy League, funded by big business, helped the cause along.

Heaven only knows what Theodore Roosevelt is doing on that endlessly reproduced iconic monument on Mount Rushmore, right alongside Jefferson. Roosevelt despised Jefferson as a weakling, and Jefferson would have despised him as a warmonger. The great historian Charles Beard wrote truly of "Teddy" that he was probably the only major figure in American history "who thought that war in itself was a good thing."

Included in the cabal was Elihu Root, secretary of war and then of state under TR, who advocated "the creation of a military spirit among the youth of the country."

The acquisition of the Philippines cast the United States into the arena of contending imperialisms in the Far East, including especially Japan's. Antiwar congressmen exposed the links between the drive for a great ocean-going navy and the munitions industry, to no avail.

Ekirch is perhaps too lenient on Woodrow Wilson. Already, Wilson's note to Germany following the sinking of the *Lusitania*, in which he reiterated the US position, that Germany would be held to a "strict accountability" for the deaths of any Americans at sea from U-boats, even when traveling on armed belligerent merchant ships carrying military munitions through war zones, set the United States on a collision course for war. Here Walter Karp's *The Politics of War* presents a more reliable account.

During the war, the Espionage and Sedition Acts were used to curb dissent. The Creel Committee on Public Information propagandized for war to a hitherto unprecedented extent. The mass media incited public opinion against the demonized enemy as would become standard to our own day.

Historical revisionism flourished as the archives of major powers were opened up, forced by the Bolsheviks' unlocking of the Russian archives. True accounts of the machinations by which the European powers and then the United States entered the war led to the brief flourishing of antiwar sentiment after 1918.



AMERICA FIRST COMMITTEE

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The America First Committee was the greatest antiwar movement in history. Among its more notable members were Gerald Ford, Walt Disney, Gore Vidal, and of course, Charles Lindbergh. America First Committee poster circa 1940.

In 1933 Franklin Roosevelt was sworn in as president. This genial master of deception was not only a fanatic for naval expansion but also harbored grandiose plans for reordering the world. The geopolitical situation of the 1930s in Europe and the Far East gave Roosevelt ample opportunity for overseas meddling. The formally opposition party in 1940 nominated for president Wendell Willkie, as much of an interventionist as FDR. The greatest antiwar movement in history, the America First Committee, boasted 800,000 members, but it quickly folded when Roosevelt got the war he wanted, at Pearl Harbor.

In the Second World War America embraced militarism wholeheartedly. It has never looked back.

The worst violation of civil liberties was the rounding up and imprisonment of some 80,000 American citizens of Japanese descent and 40,000 resident Japanese aliens (not eligible for citizenship because born in Japan). Emblematic of the hysteria generated by this most-just of just wars, the US Supreme Court upheld their incarceration. Renowned liberals Hugo Black, Felix Frankfurter, and William Douglas joined the majority. California Attorney-General Earl Warren was a passionate advocate for incarceration.

Following the war, “the atmosphere of perpetual crisis and war hysteria” engendered by Washington never let up. Harry Truman initiated what Ekirch rightly calls “the aggressive American foreign policy of the Cold War.” Dozens of entangling alliances were formed, committing the nation to defending the existing international order against any who would challenge it. A new enemy intent on world-conquest was conjured up in the form of the Soviet Union and international communism. This conflict included two “hot wars” and entailed vast continuing military budgets, now to pay for ever-more-deadly nuclear weapons as well. It lasted over 40 years and cost civil society trillions of dollars.

As Ekirch presciently foresaw, even a peaceful resolution of the Cold War was not “sufficient to release the American people from the power of the Pentagon and its corporate allies.” Incursions of the armed forces occurred in Yugoslavia, the Philippines, Somalia, and elsewhere.

Now the United States is involved in wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, soon perhaps also in Iran.

Today there is no conscription, which caused too many problems for the militarists in the Vietnam years. But the American empire bestrides the globe. The United States has over 700 military bases overseas, plus some dozen naval task forces patrolling the oceans, with a multitude of space satellites feeding information to the forces below. Every year its “defense” (i.e., military) budget is nearly equal to those of all other countries combined. Does anyone doubt that for America there are more wars, many more wars, in the offing?

As the great social scientist Joseph Schumpeter wrote of the military in imperialist states, “Created by the wars that required it, the machine now created the wars it required.”

Notes:

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1 Ralph Myles, Colorado Springs, 1972.

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